

Michael-Sebastian Noble. *Philosophizing the Occult: Avicennian Psychology and 'The Hidden Secret' of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*. Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. 299 pages. ISBN: 9783110644579.

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Michael Noble's *Philosophizing the Occult* lies at the intersection of two recent developments in Islamic studies: (1) the renewed appreciation for the philosophical and theological thought of the Sunnī theologian and polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), a trend that has led to an exponential growth of studies devoted to this figure since the 2000s; and (2) the recent consolidation of a subfield devoted to the study of what was hitherto considered a marginal and problematic preoccupation of many Muslim thinkers, namely the occult sciences. The work is thus significant for two reasons. It aims to show how al-Rāzī's controversial engagement with the astro-magical traditions of the period is a key element in the formation of his mature intellectual project and how the astrological tradition and the theories that underlie them stood alongside the disciplines of *falsafa* and *kalām* as major sources of the scientific, philosophical, and theological perspectives that emerged in the post-Avicennian period.

The centerpiece of *Philosophizing the Occult* is al-Rāzī's infamous work on astrology, astral magic, and talismans: *al-Sirr al-maktūm fī al-mukhāṭabāt al-nujūm*. While a few scholarly articles have been written on this text, Noble's work is the first book-length monograph devoted to its content. The focus of the study, however, is on the philosophical theories that account for the efficacy of talismanic magic (*al-ṭīlismāʾ*) and the planetary rituals (*daʿwat al-kawākib*) of the

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so-called Sabian-Harranians.¹ This choice of topic allows Noble to contribute to both the scholarship on *al-Sirr* as an occult text as well as on al-Rāzī as a philosopher and theologian. The core of the work can be divided into two main concerns. The first is al-Rāzī's systematization of what can be broadly termed the "theory of astral magic" (Chapters 4-6, and 8-9). These sections examine the metaphysical, psychological, cosmological, and epistemological principles that account for the efficacy of Sabian occult craft. Here, Noble regards al-Rāzī as a neutral researcher who treats his subject matter as "a genuine science," marshalling authoritative scientific theories to explain why talismans and planetary rituals work (5, 26). The central scientific and philosophical framework al-Rāzī uses is Avicennian. This is especially relevant regarding the role of the faculty of estimation (*wahm*) in the manipulation of occult forces for human ends and the theory of celestial noetics as the metaphysical basis for visionary prognostication on the part of oracles, saints, or prophets. However, Noble shows how al-Rāzī uses Avicenna's (d. 428/1037) theories critically, introducing new concepts and expanding their reach to include a wider variety of occult phenomena. His discussion of the psychological dimensions of occult power is perhaps the most penetrating and extensive treatment of the subject available in current scholarship. It demonstrates how both Avicenna and al-Rāzī should be counted among the preeminent philosophers of occult phenomena of the period. Noble also highlights how al-Rāzī cites other authoritative cosmological theories to account for occult phenomena, as in the case of the Hermetic conception of Perfect Natures and the Chaldean view regarding the theriomorphic (animal-like) shape of celestial bodies. While Noble is correct to argue that this recourse to non-

1 The designation of "Sabian" in Islamic historiography and its relationship with the practitioners of astrology of Harran (now Southeastern Anatolia) is a controversial and complex issue. Noble offers a summary of the problem (6-8). In the late ninth century CE, the inhabitants of Harran began to claim that their star-venerating religion is identical to the "Sabians" referred to in the Quran and traced their lineage to the teachings of the prophet Idris/Enoch. At around the same time, it became a widely accepted view in the scholarly milieu of Baghdad that this antediluvian prophet is none other than Hermes Trismegistus, who had already acquired a reputation as the supreme authority of talismanic magic, astrology, and alchemy through a separate body of texts that owe its origins to Late Antiquity. By the time Rāzī was writing *al-Sirr*, the authoritative practice of these occult disciplines and the astrological cosmology they assumed, the Harranian religious teachings regarding the divinity of the stars, and the claim to the Idrisi/Hermetic prophetic lineage have converged in a single profile of a religious community known as the "Sabians." Whether or not some of the Hermetic texts that circulated in ninth-century Baghdad were Harranian of origin or were reflective of its religious teachings is a point of debate among scholars. Whatever the case may be, the philosophical and technical knowledge of these "Sabians" and the texts associated with them form the main subject of inquiry of *al-Sirr*. It should be noted, however, that al-Rāzī draws from a wide range of sources beyond those associated with the Sabian-Harranians, such as Abū Ma' shar al-Balkhī (d. 272/886), Ibn Waḥshīyya (d. 318/930-31), and Pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana (Balinūs).

Avicennian sources is an attempt to uphold a theory of prophecy more consistent with the Quranic perspective, he does not systematically discuss whether this divergence can also be due to aspects of al-Rāzī's own theory on the nature of the soul and its faculties that departed from the Avicennian model and which were already established in early texts such as *al-Mabāḥith*, *al-Mulakḥḥaṣ*, and *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*. In any case, this inter-disciplinary procedure on the part of Fakhr al-Dīn amplifies the author's argument that a major aim of *al-Sirr* is to present a scientific account of astro-magical operations.

The book's second major concern is to show beyond this somewhat neutral and perhaps academic interest how al-Rāzī evinces doctrinal commitment to certain aspects of Sabian thought (Chapters 7, 10-12). These doctrines include (1) affirming the attainability of human perfection and salvation through the acquisition of true knowledge of God and the celestial realm and the practice of asceticism and meditative techniques, and (2) a naturalistic theory of prophecy that places an emphasis on the celestial origins of the "prophetic soul." The method Noble uses to determine whether al-Rāzī was committed to a certain Sabian doctrine is to check it against the corresponding discussion in the later work *al-Maṭālib al-ʿaliya*, especially in the sections devoted to prophecy (Volume 8) where we find some of the most extensive systematic discussions on astrology, talismans, and astral magic. Furthermore, in order to define the limits of this commitment, Noble also highlights discussions in *al-Sirr* where the author refutes certain aspects of Sabian thought that he deems inconsistent with Ashʿarite theology (26-27, 52-59, 217-26, 253-54). For instance, Noble argues that while al-Rāzī accepts astrological worldview as a model for understanding natural phenomena, he maintains God's ultimate control over nature. The theological doctrine of divine omnipotence underlies over any systematic analysis of "secondary causes." He also upholds the uniqueness of the prophetic faculty in comparison to other non-ordinary states of being, such as those possessed by magicians, oracles, shamans, etc. against the "relativizing" approach of Avicenna's theory of prophecy. Thus, Noble argues that, "[i]n laying out the foundations of [Sabian] science and identifying where it came into conflict with Islamic belief and practice, Rāzī's ultimate objective was to integrate its insights into the philosophical-theological synthesis of his late career in much the same manner by which he harmonised certain aspects of Avicennan philosophy with the fundamental truths of his theology that could admit no compromise" (5; see also 45, 251). The claim here is that al-Rāzī's later-period theory of human perfection, soteriology, and prophetology—especially those aspects that adhered neither to the school doctrine of Ashʿarī *kalām* nor to

Avicennian *ḥikma*—was influenced by his early engagement with the Sabian astro-magical tradition. Noble interprets this approach as the outgrowth of al-Rāzī’s “ambition to produce an ‘Ash‘arising’ philosophical theology that might replace Avicenna’s comprehensive Peripatetic system” (26).

Prefacing these two major concerns in *Philosophizing the Occult* is an insightful introduction covering al-Rāzī’s intellectual context, the identification of Sabians in Islamic historical writings and al-Rāzī’s works, the possible political motivations of the composition of an occult work like *al-Sirr*, and a justification of the author’s methodology (Chapters 1 and 2). As for the sources of the text’s theoretical and technical discussion on astral magic, its reception by later occultists and critics, the distribution of its manuscript witnesses, and the influence it exerted on the subsequent development of occult arts in the Islamicate, these topics are not addressed at length in the study (as duly acknowledged on 46).

Let us now turn to the theoretical framework informing *Philosophizing the Occult*. From the presentation of Noble’s central arguments above, we see how he adheres closely to the interpretive framework established by Ayman Shihadeh in his pioneering works *From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī* and *Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*.² In these works, Shihadeh argues that (1) al-Rāzī’s intellectual project consists of a synthesis of *kalām* and *falsafa* called “philosophical theology,” (2) this was achieved in the later stage of his career beginning with *al-Muḥaṣṣal* and fulfilled in *al-Maṭālib*, and (3) the formation of this synthesis can be charted over the course of al-Rāzī’s career through the development of his ethical theory. Noble closely adheres to this perspective on all three counts. As mentioned above, one of the core arguments of *Philosophizing the Occult* is that al-Rāzī’s engagement with Sabian doctrines in *al-Sirr* was a key element in the formation of his mature philosophical theology, whose complete form can be discerned in *al-Maṭālib*. However, new perspectives have since been proposed, in particular by Bilal Ibrahim, whose analysis of the logic, epistemology, and ontology of *al-Mabāḥith* and *al-Mulakhkhaṣ* has shown that in these early works al-Rāzī was already proposing an original paradigm of science and philosophy that was distinct from that of Avicennian *ḥikma*. Given the fact that *al-Sirr* was written during the same period as the two works above, shouldn’t the text first be interpreted in light of their methods and

2 Ayman Shihadeh, “From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī: 6th/12th Century Developments in Muslim Philosophical Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2005): 141-79; *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2006).

aims and only then be compared to those of late-career works such as *al-Maṭālib*? The point here is not that the author ought to use one perspective over the other but that an engagement with an eclectic, unconventional, and understudied text such as *al-Sirr* should have treated these scholarly perspectives as questions in need of scrutiny rather than as premises of the inquiry. This is especially important considering the relatively early state of Rāzian studies and the incipient character of our understanding of his intellectual project.

Noble's hermeneutic affects how aspects of al-Rāzī's cosmology in *al-Sirr* are interpreted, especially those that were influenced by Sabian theories. Of particular insight is the discussion on the Hermetic theory of Perfect Natures (*al-ṭibā' al-tāmm*) as the metaphysical and cosmological basis for his theories on ethics, human perfection, soteriology, and prophetology (229–49). Noble shows how, in affirming selective precepts of astrological cosmology, al-Rāzī maintains a systematic philosophical methodology while preserving the core teachings of his theological school, especially regarding the doctrine of divine oneness and omnipotence (239–45, 250–58), as well as aspects of Quranic angelology (226–28). One of these doctrines, however, requires closer scrutiny. Noble argues that al-Rāzī affirms the position attributed to the Sabians that the outermost sphere is the Absolute Giver (*al-mu'ī fi al-muḥlaq*), which functions as “the metaphysical efficient cause of encosmic change” (128, 133–34, 213, 250, 253). This position is presented as the source for Fakhr al-Dīn's counter-Avicennian doctrine of the Universal Soul that is only explicitly affirmed in *al-Maṭālib*. However, its basis in *al-Sirr* depends on a misreading of the two passages that appear to affirm this position (as respectively discussed on 128, 134–35, 213). In the first passage, al-Rāzī describes the Absolute Giver in two seemingly contradictory ways within the same sentence: the first identifies the Absolute Giver as the starless sphere (*al-falak ghayr al-kawākib*), while the second identifies it as the Sun.³ Noble writes that al-Rāzī must be contradicting himself and opts for the first attribution as canonical. A closer reading shows this

3 المقدمة الرابعة: عطايا الكواكب يختلف من وجوه. أحد بسبب القرب والبعد من المعطي المطلق أعني الفلك غير الكواكب. فما كان أقرب كان أقوى على العطايا. والثاني بالكبر والصغر فالأكبر أعطى. والثالث البطيء والسريع فالأبطأ أعطى والأعلى مكمل لما دونه والأسفل يكون كالأخذ إلا أن هاننا دقيقة وهي أن عطايا الكواكب يكون كالمكملات والمعطي المطلق هو الشمس.

In the lithographic edition cited by Noble (Cairo: Mirzā Muḥammad Shirāzī, n.d.), this passage appears in last four lines of pg. 95. My transcription above is based on a collation of this edition as well as the following manuscripts I consulted: Petermann (Berlin). I 207 (f. 79r) and Bibliothèque Nationale du France (Paris) Arabe 2645 (f. 162v).

cannot be the case. Firstly, the seemingly contradictory ascriptions are attested in the manuscript witnesses I consulted, one of which (Arabe 2645) Noble did not use in his study. Furthermore, the meaning of the passage also indicates that al-Rāzī uses the term “absolute giver” in a functional rather than a schematic or doctrinal designation. His intention is to point out an important exception to the astrological principle that the higher the position of a celestial entity the more dominant its celestial influence. The fixed stars, being the highest celestial entities, should be the most dominant causal factor governing the universe. However, al-Rāzī writes that in the sublunary world (*hāhunā*), it is the Sun that acts as the absolute giver, while the more elevated fixed stars play a mere complementary (*mukammilāt*) role in the cycle of generation and corruption. The syntax of the passage leaves little doubt that al-Rāzī wants to remind the readers that this exception does not contradict the general astrological principle. Furthermore, nothing in this passage indicates that the outermost orb, or the Sun for that matter, performs a similar function to that of the Active Intellect, which in Avicenna’s system is the effective cause of sublunary *species-forms* and prime matter. In fact, the astrological position may not even contradict Avicennian cosmology, because even the Master would probably affirm that the outermost sphere, being governed by the First Intellect, is functionally the “absolute giver” for all celestial entities as well as the sublunary realm. Since the term “form” (*ṣūra*) is not even mentioned in this passage, the term “giver” might just refer to the *material* effects exerted by the Sun (i.e., heat, light, and its rotation around the ecliptic) and by the outermost orb, which produces the common diurnal motion of celestial entities that endows spatial and temporal order to the sheer complexity and diversity of celestial motions. As for the second passage Noble cites in defense of his position, no mention of the starless sphere can be found, though the term “form” is used: “*kullu ṣūratin fī hādha al-‘ālamī fa-lahā mithālun fī al-falaki.*”⁴ Noble translates *al-falak* as “the starless sphere.” However, when the term appears in astronomical texts as an unspecified sphere (as opposed to the “sphere of Venus” or the “outermost sphere”), it usually refers specifically to the sphere that houses the fixed stars. This is confirmed by the examples al-Rāzī immediately provides for these “elevated forms” (*al-ṣuwar al-‘ulwiyya*), which are the constellations of Draco, Scorpio, and Leo. For obvious reasons, these clusters of stars cannot reside in a *starless* sphere. The singular unspecified *falak* of the passage

4 Quoted by Noble (134-35 and 213). In the lithograph edition, this passage is found in the last three lines of pg. 17, as well as the following manuscripts I consulted: Petermann (Berlin). I. 207 (f. 16v) and Bibliothèque Nationale du France (Paris) Arabe 2645 (f. 26r).

is thus better translated as “firmament.” As a result, the connection between the Sabian doctrine of the “absolute giver” in *al-Sirr* and the doctrine of the Universal Soul canonically affirmed in *al-Maṭālib* appears tenuous and overstated.

These considerations broach the question of how exactly we should approach *al-Sirr*. Is it a source-text for al-Rāzī’s “philosophical theology” that is consummated in later texts such as *al-Maṭālib* (as Noble treats it), or is it better conceived as a product of the intellectual project and methodology of his early career? Does it shed new light on the nature of al-Rāzī’s early thought when compared to other works of the period, such as *al-Mabāḥith*, *al-Mulakḥḥaṣ*, or *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*? Finally, to what extent should we impose a teleological hermeneutics to the Rāzian oeuvre that presumably culminates in *al-Maṭālib*?

These quibbles aside, Noble’s *Philosophizing the Occult* is clearly an indispensable and pioneering contribution to both Rāzian and occult studies. It convincingly demonstrates that *al-Sirr* is not a minor composition in al-Rāzī’s oeuvre but is a key text containing some of his most original and unconventional discussions on fundamental philosophical and scientific issues in cosmology. Future studies on Fakhr al-Dīn’s system would have to take into consideration what Noble has shown to be a persistent and serious engagement with the Sabian occult science. The book’s analysis of *al-Sirr* allows the full breadth of al-Rāzī’s polymathic talents as a theologian, philosopher, astronomer, and doxographer to transpire in a manner that reflects the nature of text itself. This is achieved without having to diminish his commitment to each of these areas of thought. Furthermore, as an introduction to an occult text, Noble has shown that, far from being a marginal composition, an occult text like *al-Sirr* functioned as a major site in which the dominant strands of thought in the 12th century Islamic East converged on what is effectively a manual for practicing the occult arts. Recent studies in Islamic philosophy and theology have enthusiastically pointed out how practitioners of *ḥikma* and *kalām* were also authorities in the scientific fields of medicine and astronomy, a fact that has the effect of increasing their value in contemporary research. With mounting evidence that the same figures took occult sciences seriously and contributed to their internal development, perhaps a new paradigm is needed to evaluate what exactly counts as legitimate forms of systematic knowledge, whose content ought to be preserved and valued by the scholarly community.